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LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

SHOULDER TO SHOULDER

Dear Editor:

Congratulations on your "Malign Neglect" issue [*L.A. Weekly*, Dec. 30-Jan. 5]. Such attention by the local media is sorely lacking and long overdue. Also, your writers correctly focused on the failure of Mayor Bradley's office to do more to alleviate the situation in South-Central. However, you are wrong to place the blame solely on the mayor's shoulders, rather than on the shoulders of the white community, in particular the white-male-dominated City Council. Much of the misallocation of resources you documented is the direct result of City Council deals in which each council member fights solely to maximize the benefit to his or her constituency. As with most such deals, when the horse-trading is over, it is the minority communities who end up being shortchanged. These patterns of "malign neglect" existed long before the Bradley administration. Until the spotlight is turned on the City Council and other decision-makers in the white power structure, we will be treating the symptoms rather than the disease.

—Charles F. Elsesser Jr.
Los Angeles

BACK TO NATURE

Dear Editor:

Gosh. You know, I like Jan Breslauer. I respect her writing. But her review of the "Against Nature" show at LACE ("Nature Morte," *L.A. Weekly*, Jan. 20-26] is not only wrong-headed, it's dangerous and politically very naive. If I didn't know better, I'd think Jesse Helms wrote it.

Now, as I read the review, Jan thinks that a) the exhibit is "irresponsible" because, b) it "regards activism as anti-erotic" and, c) it fails "to reformulate the artistic agenda itself," concluding that, d) "Art that is truly concerned with gender and sexuality cannot be apolitical." Jan is also laboring under the *illusion* (my italics) that curators Dennis Cooper and Richard Hawkins have "*chosen* apolitically" (her italics), that the exhibit wallows in a "pre-AIDS sexuality."

Well, since she's so wrong about what is actually *in* the exhibit (and misrepresenting it to the public — where were all the "*GQ* torsos"?), it's no wonder her analysis is wacky. It's tempting to think that women will just never understand male sexuality, but then Mary Beth Crain's review of the video portion of the exhibit in the same issue (Pick of the Week) reminds us that art does have a universal voice. Some critics, however, have their ears clogged with personal prejudices and agendas.

For starters, the assertion that the exhibit presents a "myopic vision of gayness" is patently absurd. The range of work in this show — performance, video, painting, sculpture, writing, conception — is wide and in no way conforms to a single vision. As for whether the artistic strategies are retrograde, I don't think so, but this is a matter of critical opinion. What is not a matter of opinon is Jan's failure to understand the show, and her presumption to prescribe what it is that gay men ought to be doing (now and in the future), and her assumption that the art on the walls is directly related to whether the artists do or do not use condoms in their sexual relations.

I too balked at the overused Aubrey Beardsley images (being now old enough to have witnessed their psychedelic iconization in the '60s), but they did serve to establish the historicity of homoeroticism and to set the context of *The Back Way* event. Jan has totally missed the sad ironies of the juxtapositions of images from every gay man's past with the deliberately provocative use of violently erotic and unerotically violent images that specifically address the loss of innocent, free-floating desire and the need to redefine or rechannel that desire. In this day and age, representations of violence, especially when coupled with sexuality, mean something different to gay men than a) they mean to anyone else or b) they meant before the epidemic.

But I wouldn't bother writing this if I just thought Jan was wrong about the art. The problem is that she's wrong about the politics in just the reactionary way she attributes to Dennis and Richard (and, I suppose, to LACE, who deserve all the praise any of us can muster for their foresight in scheduling a gay male exhibit, and for their courage in mounting it even though it did not conform to middle-class liberal expectations). Yes, there are those who think that art exists to create political agendas — even though many think that the social-realist theory of art has long since lost its persuasive power. But there are also people who think with great justification that art ought to challenge both the notion of its social utilitarianism and the specific strategies the politicos want it to adopt.

For generations heterosexual power brokers (and need I add *white male* power brokers?) have defined homosexuality solely by its difference from heterosexuality with respect not only to object (same sex vs. opposite sex), but to the nature of that desire (sick, sinful, abnormal vs. healthy, sanctified, normal). This, gay men have always known, is a mistake. Homosexuality is more than an erotic response; it is also, for example, a spiritual response, even, perhaps, an aesthetic one. But the notion that gay men differ from others solely in the state of their desire has become so ingrained in gay identity that to deny us our desire is, no matter who wants to deny it, a *homophobic* impulse.

It is ludicrous for anyone to assume that "Against Nature" proposes un-"safe" sex. It is, rather, a demonstration of a newer political wave in the gay community that asserts our right never to lose touch with our desire, our eroticism, our sexuality. We understand "safe" sex — and if it weren't for us, no one else would understand it — but there is more to surviving this disease than denying what nature all along intended: the full expression of sexuality.

We're sorry that heterosexual liberals are panicking over the fact that some of us aren't giving up sex. But you see, the fanatics of the extreme right wing have been trying to get us to give it up for years, so we'll just have to assume that denying gay eroticism is politically incorrect no matter how many new diseases come along. Despite the devastation and the suffering, despite the death and loss and grief, sexuality and desire are still life-affirming in exactly the way the Greeks meant by the word "erotic." And any of us affected by AIDS (which is to say *all* of us) can use all the affirmation of life we can get these days. It's too bad Jan is still into the now-outmoded AIDS death trip. Maybe she should read Susan Sontag's *AIDS and Its Metaphors*.

—Michael Lassell
Los Angeles

Dear Editor:

A tip o' the bonnet to the curators at LACE for allowing me the opportunity to laugh and ponder, for reminding me of what it was like and of what's happening now. To your dour critic: your arrogant opinion has no sense of past, present, future or reality. As a gay person with AIDS, I found it truly offensive.

—David Navarro
Los Angeles

DOUBLE STANDARD

Dear Editor:

Your 10th-anniversary issues were a marvel in terms of both passion and diversity. People's adventures and dreams in this Second City are startling in their scope, and in their similarities. However, certain remarks in Jay Levin's introductory editorial [*L.A. Weekly*, Jan. 27-Feb. 2] show up the fact that when it comes to the anti-Israel double standard invoked by the American press, the *Weekly* is no different. I'm not sure I understand what the fact that L.A. has a substantial Jewish population has to do with their condemning the Israeli presence on the West Bank. Why does the press always demand more, morally, from Israelis and other Jews? Why doesn't L.A.'s Mexican-American population condemn the rampant corruption in Mexico? How many local Irish have condemned the killings in Ulster? What percentage of L.A.'s substantial Arab population has condemned the atrocities committed by their brethren in the Middle East and elsewhere? I can't hear. The silence is deafening.

—Richard Rebhun
West Hollywood

ADDENDA

Intern wanted for publisher's office. Clerical skills needed. No pay but great experience. Send resumes to: Paulette Taix, *L.A. Weekly*, P.O. Box 29905, L.A., CA 90029. Please, no calls.

The *Weekly*'s film editor is seeking a full-time intern to work two to three hours a day, five days a week. No pay to start, but some writing assignments may occur. Send resume to Helen Knode, the *Weekly*, 2140 Hyperion Ave., L.A. 90027. Please, no calls.

In Richard Meltzer's item on romantic dining in last week's restaurant guide, the sentence "Loneness enfolds me like Mr. Pastafagiolio's gummy aperture on my prong" should have read "Loneness enfolds me like *Ms.* Pastafagiolio's gummy aperture on my prong." The *Weekly* regrets the error.

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